
Sichos in English Classics 16

Pirkei Avos



CHAPTER 5 MISHNAH 9



Sichos In English
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IN PLACE OF AN INTRODUCTION

At the Shloshim of R' Yonah Avtzon A"H, Director of Sichos in English, a resolution was taken to reprint the original weekly Sichos in English publications.

To fulfill this, a weekly booklet including a translation of a *farbrengen* as it was first published will be distributed. Our intention is to reprint the entire set in the near future.

Following the Sichos we will include an addendum with pictures, notes, and insights into the process of its publication.

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PIRKEI AVOS:

CHAPTER 5 MISHNAH 9

“Exile comes to the world for idolatry, for immorality,¹ for murder, and for not leaving the earth at rest during the Sabbatical year.”

Pirkei Avos is “Mili d’Chassidusa,”² words of piety. They are not halachic statements, laws, but teach a Jew how to live over and above the minimum halachic requirements; they are “moral instructions and ethics.”³ As such, they are prefaced with the statement,⁴ “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai” — “to teach you, that the moral instructions and ethics in this tractate were not concocted by the Sages of the Mishnah, but these too were said from Sinai.”⁵

Since the sayings in Pirkei Avos are not statements of law but moral teachings going beyond the halachic requirement, the four things mentioned in this mishnah as bringing exile to the world cannot be taken in their plain meaning. Idolatry, immorality and murder are not only expressly prohibited by Torah, but are the three sins of which it is said⁶ “Be killed, but do not transgress.” All other laws of the Torah are overridden when there is jeopardy to life; only these three must be observed even if it means death. Because “not leaving the earth at rest during the Sabbatical year” is bracketed together with these three, it too assumes the same severity in regard to bringing exile to the world.

It is thus clear that the mishnah, in warning that “Exile comes to the world for idolatry, for immorality, for murder, and for not

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1. “Immorality” — in Hebrew, “gilui aroyos.” Usually refers to forbidden relationships, especially incest.
 2. B. Kamma 30a.
 3. R. Ovadiah of Bartenurah, Avos 1:1.
 4. Avos 1:1.
 5. R. Ovadiah of Bartenurah, *ibid.*
 6. Sanhedrin 74a.

leaving the earth at rest during the Sabbatical year,” does not mean these sins literally; for then the admonition to avoid them would not fall under the category of “words of piety;” they are the most severe of transgressions!

These four matters have various applications, ranging from the literal to the most subtle. This mishnah, part of Pirkei Avos which is “words of piety,” refers to these matters in the framework of pious conduct. It teaches that certain subtle forms of these prohibitions, although not expressly forbidden Scripturally or Rabbinically, should be avoided for through them “exile comes to the world.”

Let us now analyze each of these matters, and ascertain what are the applications warned against by the mishnah.

IDOLATRY

Everything a Jew does should be devoted to G-d, as written, “All your deeds should be for the sake of heaven”⁷ and “In all your ways you shall know Him.”⁸ Even “your deeds” and “your ways” — one’s personal, mundane affairs, not mitzvos — should be dedicated to G-d. If something apart from G-dliness is present in a Jew’s behavior — it is a subtle form of idolatry.

Ordinary actions, eating and drinking for example, even when not done for holy purposes may not necessarily be evil (as when one eats out of gluttony), but just neutral. One may think this isn’t so bad, for everything in the world is neutral until used for good or evil purposes. Pirkei Avos, however, says that because when one does something in a neutral fashion that thing has no connection to G-d, it is tinged with idolatry. Instead, “All your deeds should be for the sake of heaven” and “In all your ways you shall know Him.”⁹

A simple example: A Jew must believe that “It is the L-rd your G-d who gives you the power to gain wealth”¹⁰ and not that “It is my

7. Avos 2:12.

8. Mishlei 3:6.

9. Thus, when drinking, it is not enough to recite a blessing beforehand; the actual drinking must also be done “for the sake of heaven,” by saying L’Chaim!

10. Devorim 8:18.

own strength and prowess that brought me this wealth.”¹¹ An example of the latter attitude is the person who, upon arising in the morning, hurries to make business calls. He does not wait until he has recited “Modeh Ani,” or prayed, or learned Torah after the morning prayers — for he thinks, by then the other person may have left his home and he will thereby lose some business.

Such behavior betrays a lack of faith that “It is the L-rd your G-d who gives you the power to gain wealth.” True belief in this tenet would lead to the conclusion that a Torah lifestyle — to first pray and learn and only then do business — cannot possibly lead to loss of the livelihood set for a person by G-d. It is the belief that success depends solely on one’s own efforts that leads one to act contrary to a Torah lifestyle.

This smacks of idolatry, “avodah zarah” in Hebrew. “Avodah zarah” literally means “strange worship;” belief that it is personal prowess which brings success is “strange” to a Jew, who should know that there is nothing in the world aside from G-dliness. Idolatry in Hebrew is also “avodas elilim,” which means “worship of gods”: When one thinks that it is his own acumen which gains him his livelihood, he is worshipping his intellect, not G-d.

When one engages in business after first praying and learning Torah, he fulfills G-d’s command, “The L-rd your G-d shall bless you in all that you will do.”¹² The placing of business concerns before all else is a subtle form of idolatry.

IMMORALITY

There are some practices in which there is room for doubt if they are prohibited by law as being immoral. Although they are not practices prohibited Scripturally or Rabbinically, pious conduct forbids them.

The Talmud, for example, says¹³ that “A woman’s voice is provocative,” and therefore a man is forbidden to listen to a woman

11. Devorim 8:17.

12. Devorim 15:18.

13. Berachos 24a.

singing. But what of listening to a record or tape of a woman singing?

Halachically, one does not fulfill his obligation of hearing the reading of the Torah or Megillah by listening to a tape, for it is not a human voice.¹⁴ One cannot even hear the shofar blowing during the month of Elul on a tape, even though this blowing is only to arouse feelings of repentance¹⁵ — for a voice on tape loses the property of “words that come from the heart”¹⁶ and cannot arouse feelings of repentance.

It is thus possible that hearing a woman’s voice on tape also cannot arouse any feelings, and therefore the rule “A woman’s voice is provocative” does not apply. Various authorities have indeed debated this point.

Such debate has no room in pious conduct, for everyone agrees that listening to a woman singing on a tape will not lead to fear of Heaven; and everyone agrees it is excluded by the directive, “All your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven.” While there may be halachic debate over its permissibility, pious conduct prohibits it completely.

MURDER

Our Sages have said,¹⁷ “He who publicly shames his fellow is as though he shed blood.”¹⁸ But even this is not what Pirkei Avos is warning against, for the prohibition against shaming another is an explicit law, not pious conduct that goes further than the law.

The mishnah is referring to shaming a person under the guise of rebuking him. It is a mitzvah to rebuke another, as written, “You shall admonish your neighbor and not bear sin because of him,”¹⁹

14. See Likkutei Sichos, IX, p. 336.

15. As written (Amos 3:6): “Shall a shofar be sounded in the city, and the people not tremble?”

16. Shaloh, p. 69a.

17. B. Metziah 58b.

18. For shaming a person causes the blood to drain from his face, which is akin to shedding blood.

19. Vayikra 19:17.

for by so doing, one ensures his friend will not do wrong. One may think that the only important thing is to stop another from doing wrong and therefore he can rebuke him with no thought of whether he is thereby shaming him or not.

Pirkei Avos, “words of piety,” teaches that even when fulfilling the mitzvah of “You shall admonish your neighbor” it should be done in such a way as not to shame him — for shaming another is akin to murder!²⁰

NOT LEAVING THE EARTH AT REST DURING THE SABBATICAL YEAR

In this, too, there are Scriptural prohibitions, Rabbinical prohibitions, and those things which are forbidden only out of pious conduct. An example, especially outside Eretz Yisroel, is using an esrog, or eating fruits, which come from Eretz Yisroel. One must be careful not to use an esrog or eat a fruit from the produce of a Sabbatical year.

It is only when these most severe of matters — idolatry, immorality, murder and not leaving the earth at rest during the Sabbatical year — are transgressed, that “exile comes to the world.” We are in exile because of our sins. Of the 613 mitzvos in the Torah, the transgression of 609 of them will not lead to exile; only with the transgression of the above four does “exile come to the world.” Therefore the mishnah exhorts Jews to be particularly careful about these matters, even the subtlest forms of them.

Shabbos Parshas Balak, 5744

20. Shulchan Aruch Harav gives clear directives as to how to properly fulfill the mitzvah of admonishment — in Orach Chayim, Hilchos Massah U'Mattan 156:7 and Choshen Mishpot, Hilchos Ono'ah U'Geneivas Da'as ch. 30.

ADDENDUM

Behind the Scenes of Sichos in English

Last week we brought the Rebbe's own edits to the Sichos of Lag Baomer 5750. Here are some more edits.

Recognizing the abundance of G-d's blessings and man's role in their preservation and appropriate use will remove the basis for strife and division among nations. Once mankind realizes that G-d has provided abundance for everyone, there will be no motivation for war or strife.

Indeed, adopting this approach adds to the blessings G-d grants in the world at large and avert the ^{//}need^{//} for Him to use temporary measures -- earthquakes and the like -- to remind us of His constant presence and His control.⁷

1) "Recognizing the abundance of G-d's blessings and man's role in their preservation and appropriate use will remove the basis for strife and division among nations. Once mankind realizes that G-d has provided abundance for everyone, there will be no motivation for war or [*the Rebbe added in the word 'even'*] even strife".

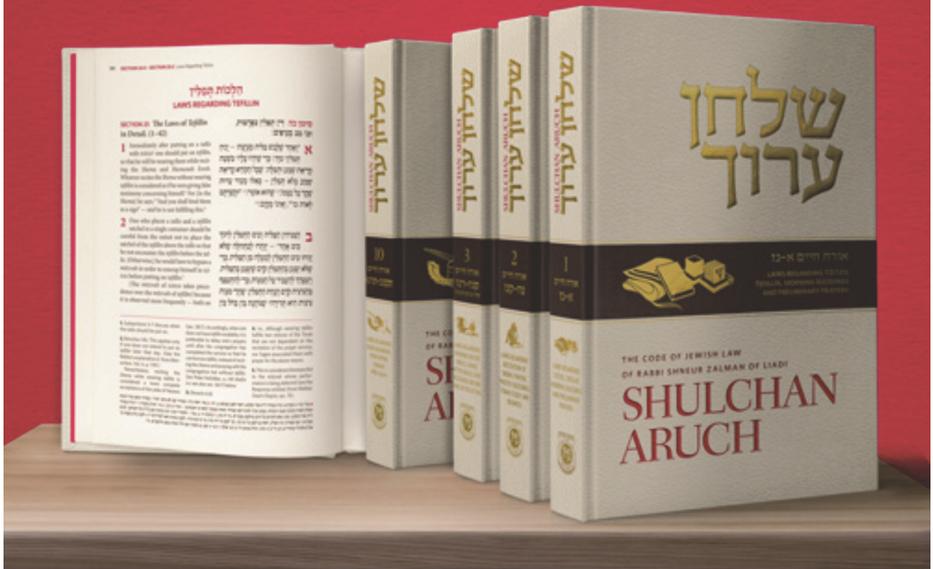
2) "Indeed, adopting this approach adds to the blessings G-d grants in the world at large and avert the [*originally the following word 'need' was without quotation marks. The Rebbe added them*] "need" for Him to use temporary measures — earthquakes and the like — to remind us of His constant presence and His control"

Suggested interpretation: when referring to Hashem one must be cautious not to give any verbs and tasks about Him. When we say Hashem needs something it's an anthropomorphism כביכול, and therefore the word "need" must be put into quotation marks.

The goodness and blessing which G-d grants will be reflected within the personal world of each individual, and in particular, in what is the most important wish of each man, his home and his family, so that he will derive genuine nachas (^{pleasure} ~~satisfaction~~) from his children and grandchildren.

3) “The goodness and blessing which G-d grants will be reflected within the personal [*originally the following word ‘world’ was without quotation marks. The Rebbe added them*] “world” of each individual, and in particular, in what is the most important wish of each man, his home and his family, so that he will derive genuine nachas [*originally the word nachas was translated to “satisfaction”, the Rebbe changed it to:*] (“pleasure”) from his children and grandchildren.

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